

ACMI SCREEN EDUCATION

FILMMAKING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

PRE-PRODUCTION

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Getting Started

Where do you begin? Good films are the direct result of good ideas, good planning and good preparation. Filmmaking takes time as each part of the process plays an integral role in the creation of a successful end product. Student filmmaking projects require careful planning and organisation to ensure everyone gets the most out of it. The time spent getting the planning right is well worth the effort.

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Live Action or Animation?

What format are you going to choose for your film? It's best to work out the simplest method of filmmaking that matches the resources and expertise you have available in your school community. Both animation and live action films are fun to make but while they follow the same basic pre-production processes in most cases, the shooting processes are different.

For more specific information on a live action shoot and an animation shoot please see the Filmmaking Across the Curriculum: A Beginner's Guide to Production article.

Key Filmmaking Guidelines

Before launching into production some simple guidelines should be considered:

1. Keep films short and simple. 60 seconds can be a very long time watching a boring, badly made film. Aim to produce short, good quality video stories that are one to three minutes maximum in length. Many filmmakers (of all ages) fall into the trap of trying to produce an epic movie, inevitably with unfortunate consequences.
2. Good films are:
 - well thought out,
 - tightly scripted,
 - well recorded, and
 - carefully edited.
3. Allocate lots of time to the project, and then some more, as it always takes longer than you think.
4. Encourage cooperative teamwork.
5. Encourage the production teams to make all the major production decisions before the shoot begins.

Setting Up Production Teams

Filmmaking is a cooperative process. Set up cooperative Production Teams within the class. Each should have four to eight students. In a cooperative group work model, everyone plays an active role to develop his or her skills.

It is useful to have groups share their developing story ideas with the class to seek constructive feedback and to learn from and with each other.

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What's the Film's Story?

It is the quality of the idea that has the greatest impact on the quality of the final product so it is important to get the right initial idea for your film. A good story can carry a less than perfectly made film but pointless waffle will not.

Key questions to consider at this point:

- Why are you making this film?
- Are there any specific requirements such as topic, content specifications, time limit and format to consider?
- Who is your audience?
- What is your message?
- What sort of film will you make?

Narrowing Down a Film Story

After brainstorming get each production team to list the initial ideas for their film project.

First ideas are usually too “big” for a one to three minute film. At this stage each team may need to look within their initial story for more manageable “smaller” film stories of interest.

- Choose one idea
- Brainstorm a list of ideas **within** the initial story that could be more easily explored in a one to three minute film.
- Share ideas, discuss, modify, refine, justify, and negotiate until one film idea is agreed. (Set a strict time limit for this.)
- Give your film story a “working” title – this can be changed later.
- Encourage teams to practice cooperative group skills to make this an inclusive and fair experience.

What's the Film's Genre?

If this is not predetermined by the topic or a set task such as a film competition, assist students to decide what type of film they are making. Is it a [Narrative](#) or a [Recount](#) for example? (It may be easier to set one genre for the whole class and thoroughly research its structure as part of the preparation process.)

Good filmmakers know exactly how their genre works. Assist production teams to critically examine some examples of their chosen genre to identify the recognisable structure, and the important patterns and

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common features. These are called conventions and knowing how and why they are used helps us to understand how a stylised production is put together. For example, news programs follow the same basic structure, current affairs have their own structure, and documentaries are different again.

Narrative

Narrative genres include mysteries, romance, science fiction, adventure, action, horror, heroes and villains, fables, and historical narratives. The purpose of a narrative is to entertain, but it can also teach or inform. Narratives are usually imaginary but can involve factual information. The focus of the film narrative is on a dramatised sequence of events.

The structure of a narrative requires:

- an **orientation** where the story is set up – who, where, when;
- the **complication** where the story is moved along by a situation, event or problem;
- the **resolution** where the complication is solved – for better or for worse!

To write a good Narrative storyline, ask the following questions:

- Who are the main characters?
- Where is it set?
- What happens at the start?
- What's the complication or problem?
- How is it resolved?
- What twists or interesting story points will keep the audience interested?

Recount

Recounts include documentaries, news updates, and current affairs reports. Recounts reconstruct past experiences to tell what happened, recording the particulars of a real incident or imagined event.

The structure of a recount includes:

- an **orientation** giving the viewer the background information needed to understand the story: who, where, when
- a sequenced **series of events** which pull the main story along
- a **personal comment** on the story along the way.

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To write a good recount storyline, ask the following questions:

- What is the topic?
- Who is it about?
- Why?
- What are the events?
- Where is it happening?
- What is interesting about this?
- What angle will you take on this story?
- Do you agree or disagree?
- What is the role of the reporter, presenter in this film?
- How much of them will be seen? Or is it off camera narration?
- What else do you need to find out about your story? You may need to check your facts or do some extra research.

Story Outline

Once the story idea including characters and setting has been approved, researched and fine-tuned, write an outline of the story in one paragraph. A story outline does not include any dialogue.

Planning a Film Shoot

Production planning is a crucial part of the process. Production teams need to be well organised and plan their time carefully. Encourage each team to make all the major decisions during pre-production – *before* they get the camera in their hands. Production teams need to complete the following pre-production components:

- **Script** including the storyline, dialogue, directions for actors, time of day, brief location descriptions, time and lighting requirements.
- **Storyboard** showing the planned composition and framing of the shots for each scene based on the script.
- To write a storyboard you must have a clear understanding of **Camera Technique** including different camera shots, angles and movements.
- **Casting** this includes finding actors or the narrator/reporter/program anchor; or completing all animated characters.

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The Script

Write a script to flesh out the story outline. Limit the script to between one and two pages (it is important to set tight limits to keep the production scale in context). Layout and format your script using the [Sample Script](#) see Worksheet 1.

A script includes the following elements:

Characters and Roles

- Who is the film about?
- Establish characters and their roles. Write a one-line description of what you are looking for in each character to help determine the cast.
- For a documentary or news report think about who will be the reporter or the narrator.

Locations

- Where is the film taking place?
- List ideas for, or design one or two appropriate locations. Locations should be within the school or on private property as filming in public places can be difficult.

Dialogue

- What do the characters say and how do they say it?
- All dialogue needs to be short and to the point. An actor needs to say the lines so they flow well and make sense.
- If there is no dialogue in your film think about your characters facial expressions and body language. What are they thinking and feeling?

Time and Lighting

- When is it happening?
- Decide on the time of day and any specific lighting conditions if required. (Keep it simple!)

Direction

- What do you want the actors to do?
- Give the actors specific directions for each scene.

Music and Sound Effects

- Add instructions on ideas for music and sound effects if required.

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Storyboards

A storyboard is based on the script and uses rough drawings like a comic, to plan the shots for each scene. This is where you plan the composition and framing of the shots for your production. Storyboards are used for both animation and live action productions. The drawings are simple and are worked on until the planned sequence of events run smoothly. Each sketch must fill the frame in exactly the same way the shot will fill the frame on the screen in the finished film. This means you can see clearly how each shot will look. Write character's dialogue and any action beneath each shot. See Worksheet 2 for a [Sample Storyboard](#).

To plan your storyboard, think about the following:

- What do you need to show? (What can the audience assume without needing to see it?)
- What shots do you want to use? Where is a long shot/close-up etc required?
- What camera angles are appropriate?
- Where will the actors be? Which direction do they come on and off or move around in the shot?
- What sort of light do you want?

Camera Technique

Filmmakers use a variety of different shots, angles and camera movement to visually tell their story.

Common shot types include:



- **Wide shots** or **long shots** show the whole person or the whole feature object as part of the landscape. This is often the opening shot and may be called an establishing shot since it establishes the location and often the time and mood of the scene.



- **Mid shots** shows the actors from the waist up. These are the most commonly used shots for showing action and dialogue.

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- **Close-ups** show the actor's face or a significant object this allows the audience to judge the characters' reaction to what is happening.



- **Extreme close-up** shots are used for dramatic emphasis.

Storyboard by David Withers. Copyright GVP 2002.

- **A Point of View** (POV) shot is where the camera shares a character's point of view, and appears to be looking through their eyes.
- **A Reverse shot** is from the other side of the previous shot, such as cutting between two characters talking or the shot that follows a point of view shot.

Common camera angles include:

- **High angle** – the camera is positioned on an angle above the action looking down.
- **Low angle** – the camera is positioned on an angle from below the action looking up.
- **Eye level** – the camera is at the same height as the action.

Common camera movements include:

- **Zoom** – the shot zooms in to show a detail or it zooms out to show more of the scene.
- **Pan** – the camera moves from one side of the action to another following the action or showing the audience more of the scene.
- **Tilt** – the camera tilts up or down.

(Note: it is best to avoid using these as much as possible as it usually looks jerky and unprofessional.)

For examples of shot types and camera information go to the Australian Children's Television Foundation at http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/teaching_kits/lia/units/lia_tk_cam.htm.

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Casting

Cast your main parts and lock in the talent required –actors, narrator, reporter etc.

Finish up design and preparation of any animated characters or drawings if doing an animation.

What Next?

You are now ready to prepare for the film shoot. For more information see the follow up article Filmmaking Across the Curriculum: A Beginner's Guide to Production.

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Pre-Production Resources Kit – Classroom Worksheets

Worksheet 1. Script

SUPER GEEK 2

WRITTEN BY: Marieke Hardy

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Script Super Geek 2

int. school - DAY

OSCAR, ANNA, TWINS

OSCAR and ANNA exit door on the right. Anna is facing Oscar. She is unimpressed.

ANNA

The answer's no. I don't want to be Madam Nasty again.
And I thought she died at the end of Supergeek 1 anyway.

OSCAR

That's the genius! She's a zombie! The undead! Come
back from the grave to haunt Supergeek!

OSCAR

Now what do you say?

ANNA looks at him for a moment. Then walks away.

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Worksheet 2. Storyboard

SHORT CUTS STORYBOARDS -

ARTIST: DAVID WITHERS

ASPECT RATIO = 1.66 (SUPER 16)

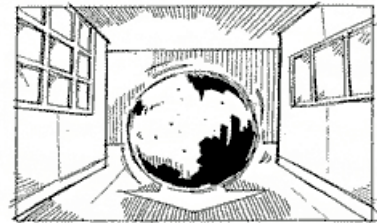
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① L/S OF PURSUIT



② C/U - DOLLY FORWARD



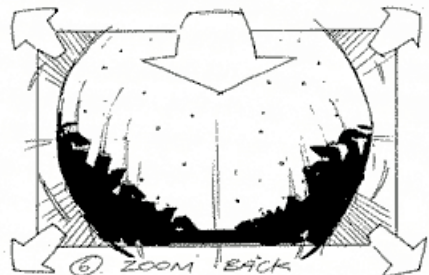
③ L/S OF APPROACHING BOLDER



④ X-C/U OF REACTION



⑤ PULL BACK (INDY!)



⑥ ZOOM BACK

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AO'Brien 1/03/2005

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Burberry
productions



Thanks to Burberry Productions, Film Victoria, the Film Finance Corporation, and the Seven Network.